

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 330

CG 018 528

AUTHOR Barnes, Stephen F.; O'Donnell, Jo Anne
TITLE Organizational Vitality in Student Affairs.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
National Association of Student Personnel
Administrators (Portland, OR, March 31-April 3,
1985). Best copy available.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) --
Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Policy; *College Administration;
*Employee Attitudes; Evaluation Methods; Higher
Education; *Institutional Environment; *Personnel
Policy; Professional Development; Program
Effectiveness; *Student Personnel Services; Student
Personnel Workers

ABSTRACT

Institutional vitality, a broad measure of the quality of organizational life at colleges and universities, has not been systematically addressed in the literature. To identify management and personnel practices which contribute to institutional vitality within student affairs divisions, a two-stage methodology was employed. First, an institutional case study was conducted in which 72 professionals at one university student affairs division completed a 50-item self-report questionnaire focusing on the articulation among divisional philosophy, goals and objectives, and individual performance; employee assessment of performance evaluation practices within the division; and employee views of professional growth and advancement opportunities. Findings from this case study were then used as the basis for a 98-item questionnaire measuring similarities and differences along similar dimensions, which was completed by 30 select chief student affairs officers (CSAO) throughout the western states. The case study analysis revealed organizational dissonance, vertical communication problems, haphazard employee evaluation procedures, ambiguous promotional paths, and traces of employee cynicism. In contrast, the descriptions of the 30 student affairs organizations by their CSAOs indicated an underlying adherence to high professional standards and successful management practices that may be characteristic of vital student affairs organizations. (NRB)

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ORGANIZATIONAL VITALITY IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

Stephen F. Barnes, Ph.D.
San Diego State University

Jo Anne O'Donnell, Ed.D.
Arizona State University

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
67th Annual Conference
March 31-April 3, 1985
Portland, Oregon

CG 018528

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ORGANIZATIONAL VITALITY IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

Institutional vitality represents a broad measure of the quality of organizational life at colleges and universities. It encompasses the processes of adaptation, innovation, and renewal both for organizations and individuals connected to them. Maher (1981) has characterized a vital institution as one which effectively provides its members with employment security and respect, stimulation and challenges, and appropriate recognition for significant contributions on behalf of the organization and its mission.

Within the past fifteen years economic and policy forces in many instances have combined to erode the vitality of higher education institutions. During periods of resource leveling off and decline organizations tend to pay inadequate attention to employee motivation, professional development, and career advancement. Kanter (1979) has suggested that limited access to advancement opportunities occurs when institutional resources are scarce and promotional paths are ambiguous. Feelings of professional "burn-out" and career stagnation (Sandeem, 1984; Melendez & Guzman, 1983; Harder, 1983; Knauer, 1983; Arnold, 1982), deterioration of employee idealism at midcareer (Rice, 1980), "creeping cynicism" and eventual separation from academia are not uncommon phenomena (Holmes, Verrier, & Chisholm, 1983; Burns, 1982; Rickard, 1982). While these symptoms have been observed throughout the educational system, employees working in student affairs appear to be unfavorably exposed to the organizational consequences of steady-state and declining economies (Barnes, Morton, & Austin, 1983).

This limited discussion of the ongoing problems of institutional vitality in higher education leads to an emerging literature on professional development. Student Affairs interest in this issue surfaces continually at regional and national conferences, in professional standards and collaborative statements developed by the associations (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1983; American College Personnel Association, 1967; Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education, 1964; American Council on Education, 1949), in training manuals and monographs (Kirby & Woodard, 1984; Beeler & Penn, 1978; Scott, 1978; Truitt & Gross, 1970), and in a wide assortment of published comments, observations, model programs, and research (Lawing, Moore, & Groseth, 1982; Carpenter & Miller, 1981; Canon, 1980; Appleton, Briggs, & Rhatigan, 1978; Beeler, 1977; Miller, 1975; Richardson, 1975; Wanzek & Canon, 1975; Myerson, 1974; Harvey, Helzer, & Young, 1972; Shaffer, 1972; Stamatakis & Oliaro, 1972). What is generally lacking in this body of literature is an exploration of the connection between professional development and the vitality of student affairs organizations within institutions. The relationship obviously is an important one since the quality of an organization is derived from its human resources and the ability of professionals within a given organization to change, adapt, and grow.

& Artman (1983) have recommended viewing professional development as a systematic process which links student services goals with staff skills and competencies needed to accomplish such goals. However, institutional vitality would appear to be more complex than the sum of goal setting and professional development. Developing human potential through career preparation programs as well as in-service training after employment can be variously linked to organizational renewal, innovation, and adaptation to change, particularly in a steady-state employment market that severely limits career advancement (Shaffer, 1984; Sneed, 1983; Sandeen, 1982; Canon, 1982). Maher (1982) has suggested that the performance evaluation system employed at an institution also may play a major role in generating employee vitality by striking a precarious balance between employee security and challenge. It is not unlikely there are additional variables shaping the context and outcome of institutional vitality.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The vitality and quality of student affairs organizations has not been addressed in any systematic way in the published literature. Rather, researcher interest has more typically focused on specific organizational components and strategies--professional development, management by objectives, strategic planning, program evaluation, leadership effectiveness of chief student affairs officers, and so on. Accordingly, our understanding of organizational dynamics remains incomplete. One way to address the issue is to investigate what organizational and human characteristics distinguish vital organizations from dysfunctional ones. Specifically, what management and personnel practices contribute to institutional vitality within student affairs divisions?

The purpose of the present investigation was to address this question in a preliminary way by identifying structural characteristics and practices of highly effective student affairs organizations. Presumably, highly effective organizations would affect an employee's sense of direction toward articulated goals, demonstrate a relationship between these goals and individual performance, and provide an ongoing array of professional growth opportunities.

METHOD

A two-stage methodology was employed in the present investigation. First, professionals in a mainstream Student Affairs Division were given a 50 item self-report questionnaire. The instrument focused on the articulation among divisional philosophy, goals and objectives, and individual performance; employee assessment of performance evaluation practices within the division; and employee views of professional growth and advancement opportunities. Second, findings from the institutional case study were used as a basis for measuring similarities and differences along similar dimensions among 30 select chief student affairs officers from NASPA Regions IV, V, and VI.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Characteristics of Case Study Sample

Located on the West Coast, the public university used in the case study was medium size (enrollment range of 10,000-15,000 students) and offered both undergraduate and graduate courses of study leading to the bachelor's, master's, or doctor of philosophy degrees. The university's Student Affairs Division had a positive regional reputation, respected externally for its divisional goals and objectives, professional staff, and management by objectives (MBO) approach to programming and service delivery. The Student Affairs Division consisted of 113 professional employees working in one of the following departments: Student Services, Counseling Center, Placement Center, Financial Aid, Office of Admissions, Registration, and Relations with Schools, Educational Opportunity Program, Health Services, Housing and Residential Services, Student Union, Ombudsman, Athletics and Leisure Services, Office of Student Life.

A total of 72 professional employees responded to the survey for a response rate of 64 percent. This group, disaggregated in Table 1 according to sex and personnel classification, served as the sample in the case study. Most of the respondents had worked for the Student Affairs Division for seven or more years; nearly 70 percent of the sample had been employed at the University for at least four years. With regard to functional work activity within the Division, respondents were evenly divided between either "student growth and development" assignments (emphasizing sustained contact with students) or "student services" (emphasizing delivery of general services to students and others). A small number of respondents, about ten percent, identified themselves as "administrative" (emphasizing broad management functions). See Table 2 for a further delineation of the survey sample.

Survey Results

Responses to the questionnaire items were analyzed according to sex, personnel classification, years of service, and work activity. On relatively few items were response variations great enough to produce statistical significance along those axes. This general response homogeneity suggested attitudinal cohesiveness regarding the issues under examination.

1. Statement of Philosophy, Service Goals, and Performance Objectives. At the time of the study the division had only recently implemented a management by objectives approach, requiring the articulation of a statement of philosophy, goals, and service objectives. More than half of the respondents were not aware of the existence, in writing, of these documents. On the general point, however, 70 percent of the sample expressed

Table 1:
Differentiation of Survey Sample
by Sex and Personnel Classification

	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Management	N=17	N=7
Staff	N=21	N=24
(3 Unknown)		

Table 2:
Differentiation of Survey Sample
by Years of Service and Work Activity

<u>Work Activity</u>	<u>Years of Service</u>			TOTAL
	<u>1-3</u>	<u>4-6</u>	<u>7 or more</u>	
Student Growth and Development	7	10	14	31
Student Services	13	5	16	34
Administration	2	0	5	7
TOTAL	22	15	35	

the belief that the formulation of student affairs goals and objectives was very important, that these should be reviewed periodically and systematically, and that they should bear a clear relationship to the mission of the university.

2. Performance Evaluation. Using a standardized written form, staff evaluation typically occurred once a year. Evaluation was most closely tied to the employee position descriptions and only occasionally associated with either personal or Divisional goals. There was no direct connection between the mission of the institution and performance evaluation, however. Most of the respondents reported the yearly evaluation consisted of their supervisor's observations and a joint review of past work, with little or no reliance on objective data. Factors least likely to enter into the evaluation process, in descending order of importance, were self-evaluation of performance, mutually agreed upon goals and performance objectives, Divisional goals, student input, written documentation, and formal peer assessment. Factors most likely to enter into employee performance evaluation were supervisor observations, review with supervisor of work output, and informal peer assessment.

While most respondents expressed a desire for clear-cut performance standards and use of objective evaluative data, more than two-thirds of the employees indicated a general satisfaction with current performance evaluation methods. At the same time, more than 80 percent of the sample acknowledged that Student Affairs managers and supervisors varied widely in their interpretations of what constituted meritorious staff performance; 97 percent believed their supervisors needed training in how to evaluate staff performance.

3. Career Advancement. Interest in career advancement was quite strong among all employees. However, the shorter the length of time one had worked within the Division of Student Affairs, the greater the expressed need for promotion ($p < .01$). Only about one-half of all respondents perceived campus opportunities for professional advancement. Employees with four to six years experience reflected significantly more optimism about advancement potential than either entering employees or those with seven or more years of longevity. Most of the sample (80%) did not believe their performance evaluations were important in decisions regarding promotion.
4. Professional Development. Over 60 percent of the respondents reported that administrators needed training in defining measurable objectives, allocating staff resources efficiently, and implementing procedures which established timelines and progress toward job-related objectives.

The greatest training need identified for administrators was in giving constructive feedback to those being supervised. This was consistent with the finding that two-thirds of the staff rarely,

if ever, discussed improvement of job-related skills or personal career aspirations with their supervisor. Where improvement in job-related skills was discussed between the supervisor and staff member, the majority indicated that no strategy for improving these skills was determined. Although a substantial number responded that "released time" would be provided to attend workshops, few reported that travel expenses would be provided for attending an appropriate workshop or training session. Staff most frequently reported that they were expected to determine their own strategies for skill improvement at their personal expense.

Management-related skills were most frequently mentioned by respondents as training which would be personally beneficial, which is congruent with the high percentage desiring upward job mobility. The concept of staff exchanges (i.e. where professionals can learn a different function within student affairs and thus expand their skills and marketability) was enthusiastically endorsed (70%) as a plan that should be implemented in the division.

There was little evidence that professionals desired or needed training in concepts or skills related specifically to student development, eco-systems or other topical student affairs issues; they were more interested in training that could be applied to a variety of professional settings, whether in education or industry. Furthermore, a substantial number reported that management training could best be approached through participation in workshops not directed or sponsored by professional educators or educational associations.

CHIEF STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICER RANKINGS

Characteristics of the Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) Sample

NASPA Vice Presidents for Regions IV, V, and VI were asked by the researchers to identify the ten most outstanding CSAO's in their respective geographical regions. "Outstanding" was defined in terms of combined years of service, reputation, program accomplishments, and professional standards.

Thirty nominations were received. As a group these individuals were highly educated (86 percent held doctorates), active participants in both regional and national affairs of the profession, and relatively well-informed as evidenced by regular outside reading of journal articles and books related to student affairs work. On the average the CSAO's had been in their current positions for eight years at predominately public colleges and universities.

This pre-selected group became the sample against which the case study findings were validated. Overall, these men and women were perceived by their respective NASPA Regional Vice Presidents as representing the highest levels of professional achievement in student affairs in the Western States. The student affairs divisions for which they provided leadership were viewed, for purposes of the study, as highly effective and vital organizations.

CSAO Survey

A 98-item questionnaire was devised and mailed to the CSAO's. The questionnaire summarized the major findings of the case study and then asked for forced-choice rankings of these findings in terms of the following organizational dimensions: Philosophy, Goals, Performance Objectives; Management Style; Performance Evaluation; Career Preparation and Advancement; and Professional Development Programs. All 30 CSAO's responded for a rate of 100 percent. The results are presented as a strategic summary of some of the structural characteristics of successful student affairs organizations.

1. Philosophy, Goals, and Performance Objectives

A distinguishing characteristic of the 30 student affairs organizations surveyed was an awareness of who they were, their professional obligations, and performance objectives within the context of their individual colleges and universities. More than 80 percent of the CSAO's had developed statements of division philosophy, written goals for the division, and written objectives for student services departments; at two out of three campuses these documents had been reviewed and revised during the last year. More than half of the CSAO's also used written performance objectives for both management and staff personnel.

2. Management Style

Nearly all of the CSAO's described their management style as proactive and value-bound, that is, relying on a set of enduring values about human nature and education in the discharge of their responsibilities. Two-thirds of the group also expressed a theory-bound bias, that is, relying to some extent on the principles of student development and student personnel administration. Consensual decision-making, achieving general agreement on a given issue, was the norm. Very few of the CSAOs reportedly used a democratic decision style.

A variety of management tools and procedures were being utilized by the CSAOs, with generally satisfactory results. The most frequently utilized tools were strategic planning (67% of the sample) and team building (63%), followed by program reviews (47%), management information systems (40%), and management by objectives (37%).

3. Performance Evaluation

The CSAOs viewed formal performance evaluation as important and essential for employee merit salary decisions, professional advancement decisions, probationary status decisions for new employees, and for cases of alleged employee misconduct or incompetence. In evaluating employee performance the actual process appeared to be tightly coupled with written departmental objectives or written employee performance objectives in at least 50 percent of the institutions, and somewhat connected at an

additional 30 percent. CSAOs reportedly relied heavily on staff members' assessment of their performance (93%) and their own gross impressions of employee performance (68%), and to a lesser but significant extent on objective data derived from rating scales, reports, utilization statistics, and student questionnaires (50%).

Employee rewards--travel money, accelerated merit increases, choice office space, equipment, preferred committee assignments, and other perquisites and forms of recognition--were used primarily by the CSAOs to reward outstanding staff performance (97%), help entry-level employees grow and sharpen their professional skills (90%), prevent employee "burnout" (87%), and reward employee loyalty (57%).

4. Career Preparation and Advancement

In recognition of limited career advancement possibilities in student affairs work at the present time, the CSAOs as a group emphasized traditional career preparation as the best hedge in an increasingly limited professional market. These activities, in descending order of importance, were taking on assignments that broaden skills and employment attractiveness (100%), earning a graduate degree (93%), achieving a level of excellence and dedication in one's current employment assignment (90%), obtaining a mentor who is already successful in higher education (90%), teaching (90%), research and writing (87%), participation in professional associations (73%), and grantsmanship (63%). In deciding on individuals for promotion, the CSAOs gave the greatest consideration to sustained quality of performance in one's present position (100%), personality (93%), recommendations of a colleague or search committee (83%), and possession of an advanced degree (73%).

5. Professional Development Programs

All of the CSAOs expressed the belief that professional growth and development of student affairs practitioners should not be left the discretion and expense of individual employees. Taking into consideration current fiscal limitations on many student affairs divisions, the CSAOs were asked to evaluate a number of development options. The following list emerged, and is presented in descending rank on the basis of perceived effectiveness: using campus based training programs if available, sending employees to regional professional development programs offered through student affairs associations, mentoring entry-level employees by experienced ones, encouraging employees to pursue academic coursework in student personnel administration, promoting staff exchanges in the division, sending employees to national conventions or institutes sponsored by student affairs associations, sending employees to training opportunities offered by non-student affairs associations, sending employees to training opportunities offered through business or industry, and establishing and maintaining a divisional library.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A case study analysis of a Student Affairs Division, considered typical of West Coast approaches to student services delivery, revealed organizational dissonance, vertical communication problems, haphazard employee evaluation procedures, ambiguous promotional paths, and traces of employee cynicism. The finding that employees with the greatest length of service were the most pessimistic regarding opportunities for advancement suggested an organization "at risk" concerning the potential for professional decline.

In contrast, the description of 30 student affairs organizations by their respective chief student affairs officers (CSAO), selected for this study on the basis of professional excellence, indicated a high degree of unanimity in their divisional philosophies and management practices. CSAOs were uniformly aware of their responsibility to evaluate performance systematically and reward deserving employees. There was evidence of consistent use of written statements of philosophy, goals, and performance objectives. Attitudes toward employee career preparation and advancement were quite similar. Professional development, for example, was held in high esteem by all of the CSAOs. It was viewed as a shared professional obligation with employees. It occupied a place of importance in the structure of the organization, a kind of center of gravity for employee performance objectives, formal evaluation, and career advancement. This pattern of conformity among 30 CASOs indicated an underlying adherence to high professional standards and successful management practices that may be symptomatic of vital student affairs organizations.

Another major finding was that environments of professional opportunity within the student affairs field can and apparently are being created despite the hard realities of enrollment contraction and resource erosion, and their correlate, career stagnation. Relatedly, it is not surprising that professional vitality without mobility also has emerged recently as a far-reaching concern among teaching/research faculty. In addressing the concern, an AAHE Task Force (1984) has developed a faculty opportunities audit as a rough measure of professional opportunity for faculty within their respective higher education institutions. The professional vitality of non-instructional staff, and a means of articulating and measuring it, is no less important. To date, methodologies for assessing professional opportunities for student affairs practitioners has not received the attention it deserves.

Overall, the study established the existence of a pattern of excellence in the professional training and educational commitment, management strategies, values, program priorities, and incentive systems of 30 CSAOs throughout the Western States. This finding along is somewhat remarkable since it cuts across geographical boundaries, institutional size and control, and educational mission.

Moreover, if these CSAOs accurately represented the personality or structural dimensions of their respective divisions and not just a organizational ideal, it may be possible to describe and distinguish vital student affairs organizations from ordinary ones. This implication is promising for a profession often beset by discontinuity, and warrants further consideration and research.

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